





Connecting knowledge to action

21 March 2019

To the Members and member organisations of EFI

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Dear Colleagues,

I would like to wish you a very fruitful International Day of Forests. The theme for this year is **Forests and Education** and I would like to share a few reflections with all of you.

Let me start by remembering Nelson Mandela, who once said that **Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world**. His words are today more relevant than ever, at a time when we need to transform our world at a scale and rate that we have never done before. This unprecedented transformation is needed because our world, relying for more than 200 years on a fossil-based economy, has become too big for our planet. We have arrived at a planetary tipping point as exemplified by climate change, the loss of biodiversity or the degradation of our natural resources. Having arrived to this point, we clearly need a new economic paradigm as the basis for a sustainable future. Education is key to building this new paradigm and ensuring that our society prospers within our planetary boundaries in harmony with nature.

Forests and sustainable forestry provide education with good examples of how economic prosperity can take place in harmony with nature. Forests are our largest terrestrial carbon sink and the main terrestrial source for oxygen, water and biodiversity on the planet. Furthermore, sustainable forestry has the largest potential to produce non-food, non-feed biological resources in the form of a versatile and renewable material: wood. A material that can environmentally outperform fossil and non-renewable products like plastics, concrete and steel and substantially contribute to the post-fossil economic paradigm.

But how can education help to build a sustainable future based on a new and mutually reinforcing relationship between economy and ecology, nature and society in the era of digitalization and urbanization? Probably, it requires not only the rethinking of education but also rethinking our learning environments: schools and even cities. A recent [study](#) from Aarhus University in Denmark found that children growing up near vegetation were also associated with a lower risk of mental health disorders in adulthood. Also, evidence suggests that outdoor learning can have not only positive attitudes regarding the natural environment, but also improved interpersonal skills including communication and teamwork as well as better acquisition of academic skills and knowledge. Finally, science shows that the use of urban forests, trees and wood is one of the most cost-effective ways we have to reduce the carbon and energy footprint in our cities and buildings, while their beauty goes beyond aesthetical considerations.

Much emphasis is now being placed on “smart” cities and schools, and on the role of new technologies and digitalization in education. But let’s not forget the words of the education expert Maria Montessori: **"A child, more than anyone else, is a spontaneous observer of nature"**.

Enjoy our day!

Marc Palahi

